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14. ABSTRACT The purpose of this paper is to explore and examine the battle of Peleliu, Operation Stalemate II during the Pacific War. The primary concern is to answer the question; how important was the seizure of Peleliu and what were the operational impacts and benefits in doing so? Did seizing the island by US forces play a role in achieving the ultimate strategic goal of defeating the Japanese or was it a wasted cause with no operational significance? The paper will illustrate the geographic importance of Peleliu, key decisions, and decision makers during the campaign. The paper will also examine the strategic and operational setting at the time while evaluating the impact of those decisions made. The paper then provides a conclusion to the information presented.					
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MASTERS OF MILITARY STUDIES

*Strategic and Operational Importance of Peleliu During
the Pacific War*

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTERS OF MILITARY STUDIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Strategic and Operational Importance of Peleliu During The Pacific War

Author: Major John Medeiros, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The operational decision to seize the island of Peleliu did little to affect the US strategic goal and outcome of the Pacific War during World War II.

Discussion: The Empire of Japan was now on the defense but its quest for power and resources had spread its military might throughout the vast regions of the Pacific islands and Far East. Maintaining key operational and logistical bases throughout the Pacific chain of islands was crucial to Japanese overall support for its war effort. By expanding its empire, Japan had formed a powerful defensive belt around its homeland. In order for the US to reach its strategic goal of the ultimate defeat of the Japanese, it was necessary to commence a full-scale assault throughout the Pacific to close in on the homeland. The island hopping strategy as it became known was the only means to array US forces closer to the mainland objective. Many islands were seized throughout the central and southern Pacific area of operations in order to neutralize Japanese strongholds and gain logistical support bases to carry on with the Pacific campaign. Many analyst and historians claim certain islands seized were a terrible lost of life without any significant strategic and operational advantages to US goals at the time; the seizure of the island of Peleliu fell into this claim. This study seeks to examine the operational necessity in seizing the island of Peleliu (Operation Stalemate II), decisions involved, and assess whether or not its seizure enhanced the US strategic goal of defeating the Japanese.

Conclusion: Seizing the island of Peleliu did little to change or contribute to the ultimate defeat of the Japanese during World War II. US war planners had the opportunity to revisit their course of action but chose not to alter their original plans. Island by-pass criteria should have been more closely examined and studied. As a result, many servicemen lives were lost as the battle of Peleliu was marked as one of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific.

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PREFACE

The Pacific War and extraordinary battles that took place during the war have always been a personal interest of mine. As an Amphibious Assault Vehicle Officer, the battle of Peleliu was an island that is often studied in my community purely for the tactics employed with the Landing Vehicle Tracked (LVT) amphibious tractor. The more I studied the battlefield tactics, the more I became interested in the operational decisions that lead US forces onto this tiny island. The famous island hopping strategy the US forces utilized often made me question the necessity of why we seized certain islands vice bypassing them. Thus, the nature of my research was to study the decisions that went into seizing Peleliu.

I would like to acknowledge my mentor on this project, Dr. Erickson, for his assistance and guidance in the development of this paper. I would also like to thank the research staff advisors at the Gray Research Center for their assistance in providing the material specific to this paper. The staff of the Gray Research Center, Archives Branch should also be acknowledged for their assistance in providing after action reports and other historical documents during this time. I would to thank LtCol Bjorne Lunde, Military Faculty advisor for his input and guidance. My spouse, Jacqueline Medeiros, should also be acknowledged for her contributions and guidance.

Introduction

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor marked the beginning of a long, lengthy, and costly war for the United States and its Allies in the Pacific. The Japanese had successfully spread its empire in Korea, China, and all throughout the islands of the Far East. The Pacific war and World War II was officially underway for the US. The Japanese expansion across the Pacific Ocean islands gave its mainland a natural defensive belt and buffer zone from its enemies. In order to close in on its mainland and continue the war effort, the US and its Allies began an island hopping strategy in both the central and south Pacific. One important objective and crucial island that received a great deal of attention by US Commanders in the Pacific was the island of Peleliu. The seizure of this tiny island became the subject of much debate during the post World War II era in examining the necessity in seizing the island. *The operational decision to seize the island of Peleliu did little to affect the US strategic goal and outcome of the Pacific War during World War II.*

Two years of war have passed and by late 1943 the US war machine was on the offensive and the Japanese were on the defense. "The major problem in defeating Japan proved to be less a matter of choosing the correct strategy than of breaking the logistical bottlenecks- devising means of getting critical items, whether amphibious craft, cargo ships, fighter planes, engineer battalions, or transport aircraft- to the right portions of the battlefronts on time and in sufficient numbers."¹ Admiral Nimitz and his core group of skilled and experienced planners conceived the famous island hopping strategy.

Reaching the mainland of Japan was problematic in terms of logistics and force build-up

¹ Spector, Ronald. *Eagle Against The Sun, The American War with Japan*. New York, NY. The Free Press, Division of MacMillan Inc., 1985. P. xiii.

and staging areas. A two-prong axis of advance (to be later discussed) was the planned method of attack for US forces to work their way through the Pacific.

US Pacific Fleet had endured key battles and began to array its forces for another advance and push in the central and south Pacific. By mid 1944, Admiral Nimitz and the Central Pacific Forces had successfully advanced on both the Marshall Islands and islands of the Marianas. General MacArthur and his Southwest Pacific Forces had by now worked their way across Guadalcanal, Bougainville, New Georgia, and virtually all of the Solomon Islands. He had also seized New Guinea and would soon be setting his mark for the Philippines.

The Palau group of islands would soon to be in range of the US Central Pacific forces. Although an island by-pass criterion was established by the councils of the Joint Chiefs of Staff based off of necessity and purpose in relation to the US strategic goal, the island of Peleliu would remain in the plans. Historians today have questioned the necessity of seizing Peleliu and whether it was worth the price US servicemen paid for an island of little use. Many US servicemen lives were lost thus questioning the validity of the plans today.² Japan was ultimately defeated but operational use of the island Peleliu was extremely limited.

Peleliu and Palau Islands

Peleliu is a part of the Palau Islands in the Pacific. It is approximately 400 miles east of the Philippines and 650 miles north of New Guinea.³ In relation to the US, the

²Miller, Donald M. *D-Days in the Pacific*. New York, NY. Simon and Schuster Inc., 2005. P. 181.

³Gailey, Harry. *Peleliu 1944*. Annapolis, MD. Nautical/Aviation Publishing Co. of America. 1983. P. 6.

Palaus are 6000 miles from San Francisco. The Palaus are a complex cluster of islands and islets stretching approximately 100 miles north to south. There are five major islands in the Palaus group; Babelthuap, Koror, Eli Malk, Peleliu, and Anguar. Peleliu lies in the southern portion of the Palau islands and is approximately 25 miles south of Babelthuap and 20 miles from Koror. The island of Peleliu from north to south is only 6 miles long and 2 miles wide. Its unusual shape was likened to a lobster claw, therefore many US planners referred to it as “the lobster claw island” during planning.

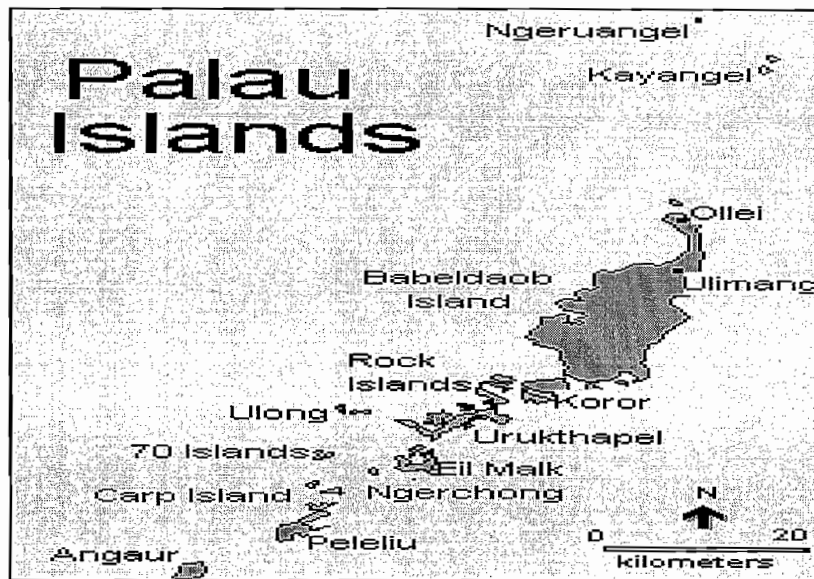


Figure 1: Palau Island group.⁴

The Japanese first seized the Palau Islands in late 1914. Because of its central location and close proximity to the main islands of the Philippines and New Guinea, it served as a logistics center for maritime trafficking. The Japanese established an

⁴ Palau Island Maps retrieved 15 Feb 2010 from <http://www.usp.ac.fj/gisunit/pacatlas/cframes/pal/pal.gif>.

administrative hub for its imports, exports, and commercial fish industry with the island natives. Geographically, as with all the Palau islands, Peleliu was in a great location for its commercial use. Strategically the Japanese felt that it was ideally located for the defense of its homeland.

The Southern end of Peleliu was relatively flat and covered by small brush and scrub trees. Beaches on the southwestern side and southeastern tip offered suitable landing beaches and would be key terrain for amphibious landings. Most of the beaches on the southern end had coconut palms throughout. On the Southern one-third of the island laid a key man made feature, the Peleliu airfield. The airfield was approximately 6000 by 40 feet making it suitable for virtually all US aviation platforms. This airfield was instrumental in the decision to seize the island.

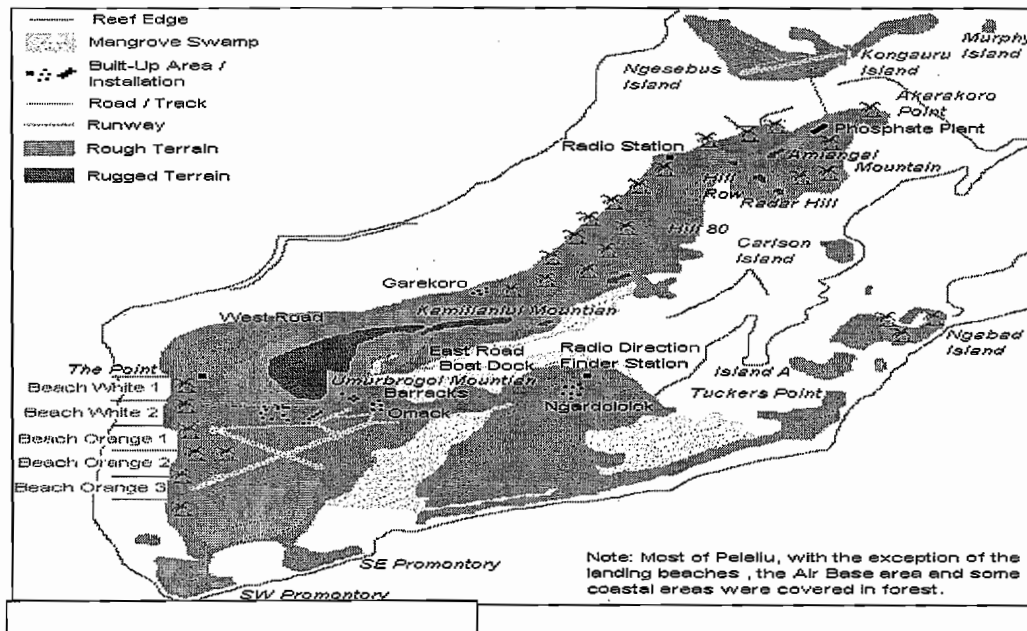


Figure 2. Peleliu Island.⁵

⁵ Peleliu Island Map retrieved 15 Feb 2010 from http://www.historyofwar.org/Maps/maps_peleliu1.html.

North of the airfield were the Umuurrogol Mountains. These mountains were a combination of rugged raised coral, limestone hills, and ridges honeycombed with outcropping, gorges, crags, sinkholes, and caves.⁶ The Umuurrogol Mountains stretched partially up through the northern side of the island and they were about 550 feet above sea level with steep cliffs up to 40-60 feet throughout. Also, a dense jungle-like forest covered the low side of the mountains. The US intelligence had no ideal how chaotic the terrain was in the mountains and what the Japanese had done to fortify their positions.⁷ The Japanese had established new tactics utilizing the terrain in and around the mountainside. The terrain combined with new Japanese tactics caught the Americans off guard and would be a major reason for the prolonged fighting.

US Strategic and Operational Situation

War with Japan was an exhausting period for US Forces. The geographic location and island nation of Japan would put America and its military in the face of many challenges and obstacles to overcome. As the war with Germany loomed on and the British forces engaged in Europe, it was clear that the war against Japan would become almost solely a US responsibility.⁸ In 1942, President Roosevelt handed the task of the Pacific to General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz. A two-prong axis of advance across the Pacific was instituted with General MacArthur commanding the Central Pacific and Admiral Nimitz commanding the Northern Pacific.

⁶ Moran, Jim; Rottman, Gordon. *Peleliu 1944; The Forgotten Corner of Hell*. West Port, Conn. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication. 2002. P. 12.

⁷ Moran. (2002). P. 12.

⁸ Ziemke, Earl. *World War II*. Funk & Wagnalls® New Encyclopedia . History.com. Retrieved 2 Jan. 2010. <http://www.history.com/encyclopedia.do?articleId=226140>.

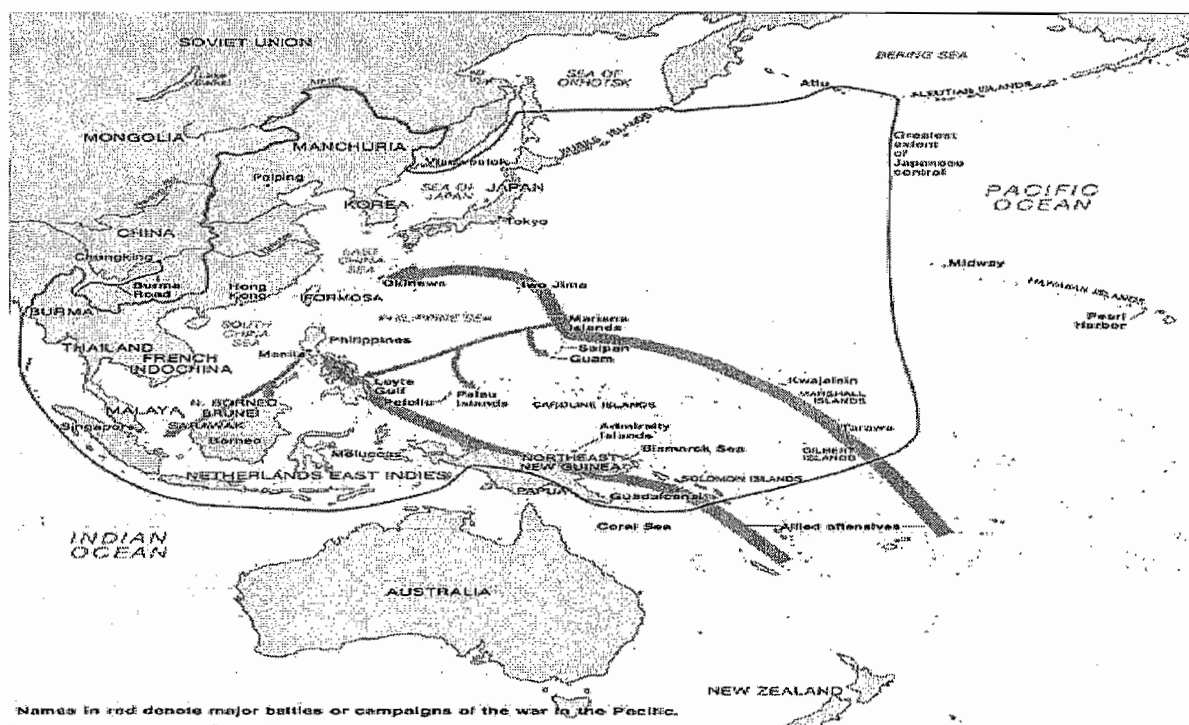


Figure 3: Japanese controlled territory.⁹

Prior to World War I, US future planners developed a number of contingency war plans with various nations of interest. The war with Japan was called the “Orange Plan”. “The plans were developed under the auspices of the Joint Army and Navy Board, which had been established by secretaries of war and navy in the summer of 1903 to consider all matters referred to it by the service secretaries requiring interservice cooperation.”¹⁰ All throughout the 1920’s and 1930’s, the Orange scenario would be executed over and over at various US military educational facilities like the Navy War College. Orange would see several variations but all maneuver and board games always pointed to the fact that

⁹ Japanese controlled territory retrieved 9 Feb 2010 from (www.nhs.needham.k12.ma.us/curWorld War II).

¹⁰ Davis, Vernon, “The History of the Joint Chief of Staff in World War II: Organizational Development: Vol. I, Origins of Joint and Combined Chiefs of Staff”, Historical Division, National Archives, Washington, DC. 1972. P. 6.

the coming war with Japan would be grim and difficult. The Orange plan was redesigned and the US planners added a multicolor assortment of plans called the "Rainbow Plans". There were now five colors that were part of the Rainbow plans; Orange, Blue, Red, Black, and Green. Orange focused on the Japanese in the central Pacific and Blue focused on the Japanese in the Philippines and western Pacific.¹¹

The Palau Islands always played a significant role in the war-gaming scenario in crossing the Pacific. Many war-gaming solutions often concluded the same result, in that the Palau Islands would be of great military value in a war with Japan.¹² The consensus from analyst at the time precluded that if Japan controlled the islands, Peleliu specifically, then there would be a major naval and air threat to protect the southern approach to the Philippines. At the Trident Conferences in May 1943 and with the Philippines already in the hands of the Japanese, Allied leaders and the US came to an agreement on future operations in both Europe and the Pacific.¹³ Peleliu and the Palau Islands were later deemed to be in the line of advancement for US forces and should be a focal point in disrupting Japanese lines of communications. The war commanders would receive more specific guidance in the form of a directive (Directive 713.3), published by the JCS directing the seizure of Peleliu and the Palau Island group by Pacific forces.¹⁴

In 1943 and 1944, the US started to look towards securing targets much closer to the Japanese homeland, in order to have staging areas to prepare for a final attack on

¹¹ Spector. (1985). P. 59.

¹² Miller, Edwards. *War Plan Orange: the U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945*. Annapolis, MD. Naval Institute Press, 1991. P. 194.

¹³ A conference between US and Allied leaders to carve out the path forward in the both Europe and Pacific Campaigns. The conference was held in Washington, DC on May 27, 1943.

¹⁴ J.C.S. 713/4. Future Operations In the Pacific, 12 March 1944. Declassified Directive (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Military Historical Center). Washington, DC.

Japan.¹⁵ Both General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz had varying views on how to best proceed in the Pacific. MacArthur favored securing garrisons on Formosa and China while Nimitz favored Japanese stronghold islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. However, prior to securing and deciding on the garrisons, one thing was clear and obvious. Recapturing the Philippines was a major goal of both Northern and Central Pacific Commands.¹⁶

President Roosevelt ordered General MacArthur out of the Philippines until an adequate force could be trained and assembled. The recapture of the Philippines would directly affect US decisions to seize Peleliu. It was then that General MacArthur made his famous remarks to the people of the Philippines, "I shall return", as he departed.¹⁷ This statement heard around the world would have a lasting impression on the US foreign relations and politics. General MacArthur argued that failure to fulfill his pledge to return soon would send an adverse psychological effect on the Philippines and severely diminish America's prestige in the Far East.¹⁸ This no doubt put pressure on President Roosevelt, but this also was an important factor in the decision to seize Peleliu, along with the JCS directive. War planners and the JCS saw the Japanese presence on Peleliu as a major threat to accomplishing not only the Philippines but Japan as well. Planners felt Japanese forces on Peleliu could easily support all surrounding island in the area of operations.

¹⁵ Antill, Peter, *Peleliu, battle for (Operation Stalemate II) - The Pacific War's Forgotten Battle, September-November 1944*, Retrieved 11 Jan 2010. http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_peleliu

¹⁶ Gailey, (1983). P. 12.

¹⁷ Moran. (2002). P. 8.

¹⁸ Moran. (2002). P. 8.

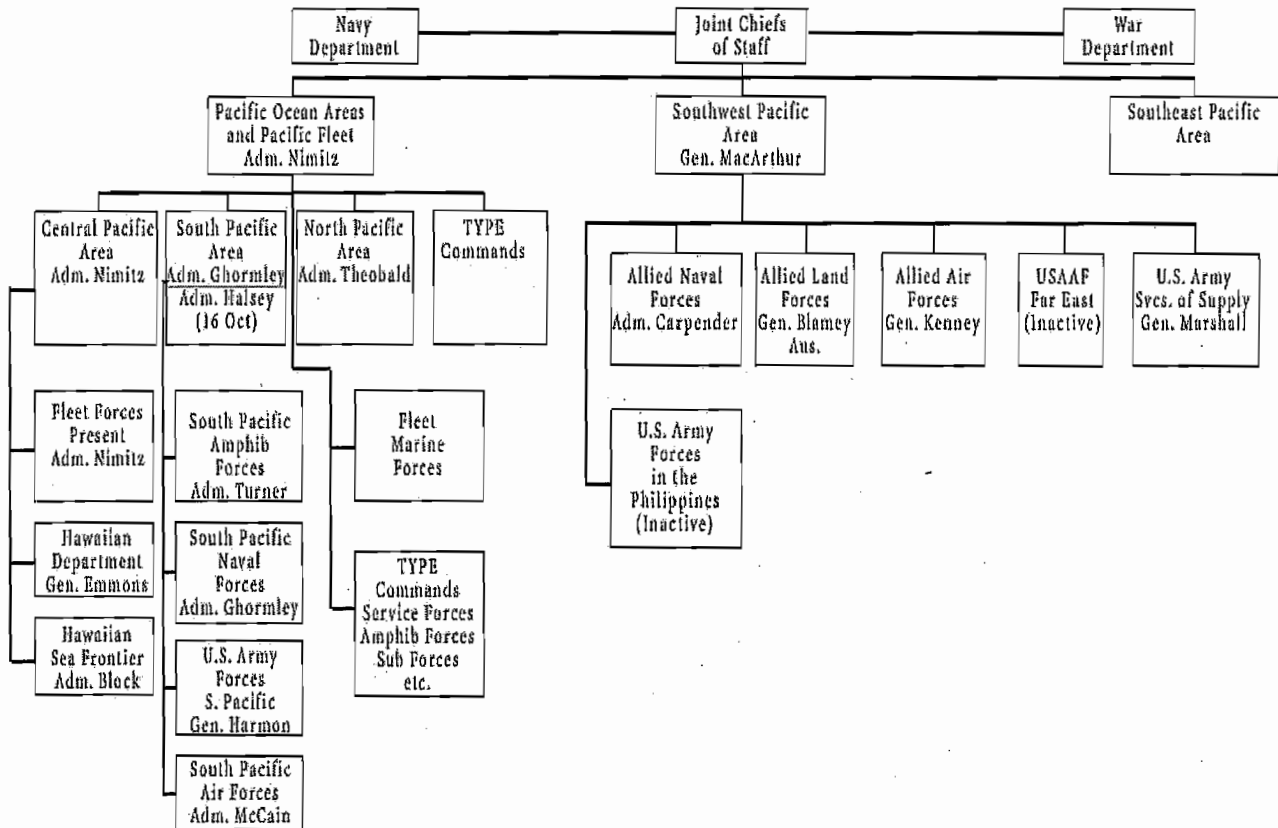


Figure 4. Pacific Command Structure.¹⁹

The battles of the Pacific waged on and the US achieved a significant operational victory during the battle of Midway. Admiral Nimitz devised a new strategy to reach US goals of closing in on the Philippines and mainland Japan. This new strategy, as mentioned previously, was referred to as island hopping. Peleliu would be one of the islands encompassed in this strategy. The focal point of this strategy was to conduct amphibious drives across the Pacific by-passing stronger islands for weaker ones.

¹⁹ Pacific Command structure retrieved 25 Feb 2010 from [http://nhs.needham.k.12.ma.us/pages/cur/World War II/WORLD WAR II-p3-04/brook-jca-p3/images/Pelmap.jpg](http://nhs.needham.k.12.ma.us/pages/cur/World%20War%20II/WORLD%20WAR%20II-p3-04/brook-jca-p3/images/Pelmap.jpg).

Island hopping allowed US forces to focus on capturing certain key islands, one after another, until Japan came within range of American bombers.²⁰ During island hopping, US forces would locate islands that would and could support aviation operations with supportable airstrips. Japanese airpower was a major concern and US planners felt disrupting their ability to provide air combat power was essential to operational success. Peleliu not only fit these characteristics with a supportable airfield but the Japanese had also built hangars, support facilities, administrative buildings, barracks, and warehouses surrounding it.²¹

Japanese Strategic and Operational Situation

Japan was an island nation with little natural resources, heavily dependent on imports. In order for Japan to grow as a nation economically, industrially, and militarily, it had to rely heavily upon other countries for strategic materials and resources such as oil. Prior to World War II, the United States had been Japan's greatest source of import, however with the "great depression" upon the US, the US ability to survive and provide lessened within itself and abroad. Japanese leaders believed that Asian colonies could supply them with raw materials and aid them in their economic problems through conquest.²² The Japanese had long coveted the resource-rich British and Dutch colonies

²⁰ *Wars and Battles, 1942-1945 - Pacific Theater, World War II*, retrieved 17 Jan 2010. <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1671.html>

²¹ Moran. (2002). P. 13.

²² Osburn, John, *Why did Japan go to War? Japanese Imperialism during World War II*, retrieved March 31, 2008. http://japanese-history.suite101.com/article.cfm/why_did_japan_go_to_war.

of Southeast Asia, and as the U.S. trade embargo tightened, the Japanese increasingly looked southward for raw materials and strategic resources.²³

It was in late 1930's that Japan began full-scale hostilities with China and their military was given approval by their government to capture and expand all throughout Asia. The US had given Japan a choice, either withdraw from China or be denied future support and resources to continue their campaign.²⁴ Japan, chose to continue their campaign and the US soon began to end all sale of oil to Japan. Acts of aggression toward the US shortly followed this decision. The US was the only nation capable of challenging Japan's powerful Navy at the time. The US Pacific Fleet was in Pearl Harbor and the US had occupied several bases in the Philippines.

The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor would be followed by a succession of seized islands throughout the Pacific to include an invasion of the Philippines. The mighty US naval power was no longer a threat and Japan's military would be free to seize Burma, Malaya, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies in a series of rapid amphibious operations.²⁵ Japan would then begin to fortify the islands in the south and central Pacific establishing a defensive belt around its mainland.²⁶ The island of Peleliu was important for their defensive belt.

Peleliu and the Palau Islands would be serve as part of the second line of defense within the Japanese defensive belt. With the US Naval fleet destroyed in Pearl Harbor, Japan had effectively reduced the US ability to wage war while at the same time building

²³ US Army Center for Military History. *Pacific War; Japan on the Offensive*. Retrieved 29 Dec 2009. http://www.worldwariihistory.info/WORLD_WAR_II/Japan.html.

²⁴ Osburn, John, *Why did Japan go to War? Japanese Imperialism during World War II*. Retrieved March 31, 2008. http://japanese-history.suite101.com/article.cfm/why_did_japan_go_to_war.

²⁵ US Army Center for Military History. *Pacific War; Japan on the Offensive*. Retrieved 29 Dec 2009. http://www.worldwariihistory.info/WORLD_WAR_II/Japan.html

²⁶ US Army Center for Military History. *Pacific War; Japan on the Offensive*. Retrieved 29 Dec 2009. http://www.worldwariihistory.info/WORLD_WAR_II/Japan.html

a defensive perimeter along outer lying islands in the Pacific to include China. Japan's empire now stretched from the northern Manchuria to the southern most East Indies islands. The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) had now effectively acquired over 440,000 square miles of foreign territory.²⁷

After Pearl Harbor, the Palau Islands were used as a jumping-off point for Japan's attack against the Philippines.²⁸ As the Japanese offenses moved along, they used Peleliu as a staging base and logistics operations hub through southern and central Pacific. The Japanese would stage thousands of men in preparation of upcoming offensives and use the Palaus as training bases and practice areas. In mid 1944, with the US having success pushing through both the central and southern areas of operation, the Japanese began to build up forces on Peleliu.

The Japanese would have a total of over 12,000 men on the island defending it. This number includes approximately 1500 civilian laborers. Commanding the Japanese and responsible for the defense of Peleliu, was Colonel Nakagawa Kunio and his 2nd Infantry (reinforced). Colonel Kunio was an extremely seasoned officer who was considered one of Japan's finest tacticians, both offensively and defensively. His plan all along was to bleed out the Americans and make US forces suffer for every inch on the island. "The Japanese planned to fight a war of attrition and bleed the Americans white".²⁹

²⁷ Moore, Jeffrey M. *Spies for Nimitz; Joint Military Intelligence in the Pacific War*. Annapolis, MD. Naval Institute Press. 2004. P. 2.

²⁸ Garrand, George W. and Stobridge, Truman R. *Western Pacific Operations: History of the U.S. Marine Corps Operations in World War II*. Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office. 1971. P. 67

²⁹ Antil, Peter. 2003. *Angaur and Ulithi, battle for, (Operation Stalemate II)*. Retrieved. 11 Jan. 2010. http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_angaur.html.

“The defense of Peleliu would be conducted with new tactics - no longer would the Japanese try and hold the landing beach in strength, where they could be subjected to fierce aerial and naval bombardment but would lightly defend the beach, construct a defense in depth utilizing the terrain to best advantage and counterattack on the first night while the Americans were still consolidating the beachhead”.³⁰ This new way of fighting would have an extremely devastating affect on all US servicemen fighting on this tiny island.

Operation Stalemate

Both President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill approved the Pacific wars invasion and timetable in August 1943 after the Trident conference. A war council was held in Quebec, Canada, code name QUADRANT, that laid out plans for a long-range strategy to win the war.³¹ Once approval was given, Admiral Nimitz went to work right away planning for *Operation Stalemate*, the seizure and occupation of the Marianas and Palau Island group, which included Peleliu. Here, US forces would take advantage of the Palaus’ airfields and anchorages for future operations.³²

For Admiral Nimitz, Operation Stalemate had two purposes. The “two major reasons to seize Peleliu; first, to remove from MacArthur's right flank, in his progress to the Philippines, a definite threat of attack; second, to secure our forces a base from which

³⁰ Antil, Peter. 2003. *Angaur and Ulithi, battle for, (Operation Stalemate II*. Retrieved. 11 Jan. 2010. http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_angaur.html.

³¹ Ross, Bill. *Peleliu, Traffic Tuimph; The Untold Story of the Pacific War's Frogotten Battle*. New York, NY. Random House Inc., 1991. P. 13.

³² Garrand. (1971). p. 52.

to support MacArthur's operations".³³ The original date set for Operation Stalemate was 31 December 1944. Operation Stalemate was to be launched following the seizure of the Marshalls and Truk, but would precede the invasion of the Marianas.³⁴ Because of both operational success and setback on key islands in the Pacific enroute to Peleliu, the actual date to Operation Stalemate would change twice.

General MacArthur had successfully defeated Japanese forces east of New Guinea and west of New Britain. He also took the Solomons and neutralized forces at Rabaul. Meanwhile, Admiral Nimitz drove across central Pacific seizing Tarawa, Kwajalein, and other islands in the Marianas. The island hopping strategy had brought about great success. The speed of success allowed the Pacific commanders to push up Operation Stalemate's date forward from 31 December 1944 to 8 September 1944. However, the fighting in the Marianas brought unexpected delays to Admiral Nimitz's forces. The fighting in Saipan, Guam, and Tinian; battle of the Marianas was extremely difficult. The fighting was more costly and protracted than predicted, with the Americans suffering some 27,000 casualties.³⁵

The protracted fighting in the Marianas directly affected Peleliu in terms of manpower and shipping available. First, it delayed the arrival of the new III Amphibious Corps commander, Major General Roy S Geiger. General Geiger was an aviator who was considered to be one of the foremost experts in fire support and logistics. Second, the extended fighting in the Marianas "continued to tie up troops, resources and shipping

³³ Hallas, James H. *The Devil's Anvil, The Assault on Peleliu*. West Port, Conn. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication. 1994. P. 3.

³⁴ Hallas. (1994). P. 3.

³⁵ Antil, Peter. 2003. *Angaur and Ulithi, battle for, (Operation Stalemate II)*. Retrieved. 11 Jan. 2010. http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_angaur.html.

(particularly the III Amphibious Corps and 77th Infantry Division on Guam and the 27th Infantry Division on Saipan)”.³⁶

As the fighting continued in the Marianas, new intelligence was collected on Saipan. The new intelligence and information was gathered from the files of Japanese forces captured from the 31st Army and the specific capture of one of their intelligence officers. The new information captured pertained to the Japanese airfields on both Peleliu and Babelthuap Island. Initial assault plans for Operation Stalemate called for Nimitz forces to put equal amount of attention on both airfields. However, the new information revealed that the Babelthuap airfield was marginally sufficient for Nimitz’s needs while Peleliu airfield offered a more favored operational advantage.

Based off of the newly collected intelligence, Admiral Nimitz changed his plans and had US forces only neutralize Babelthuap airfield vice seizing. The only airfield US forces would focus on seizing would be the one on Peleliu. This new information, change in plans, and delay in securing the Marianas would force Pacific commanders to adjust their timeline once again and shift the assault date of Peleliu to 15 September 1944 instead of 8 September. With this new shift, Admiral Nimitz revised the plan and renamed it Operation Stalemate II.

³⁶ Antil, Peter. 2003. *Angaur and Ulithi, battle for, (Operation Stalemate II)*, Retrieved. 11 Jan. 2010. http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_angaur.html.

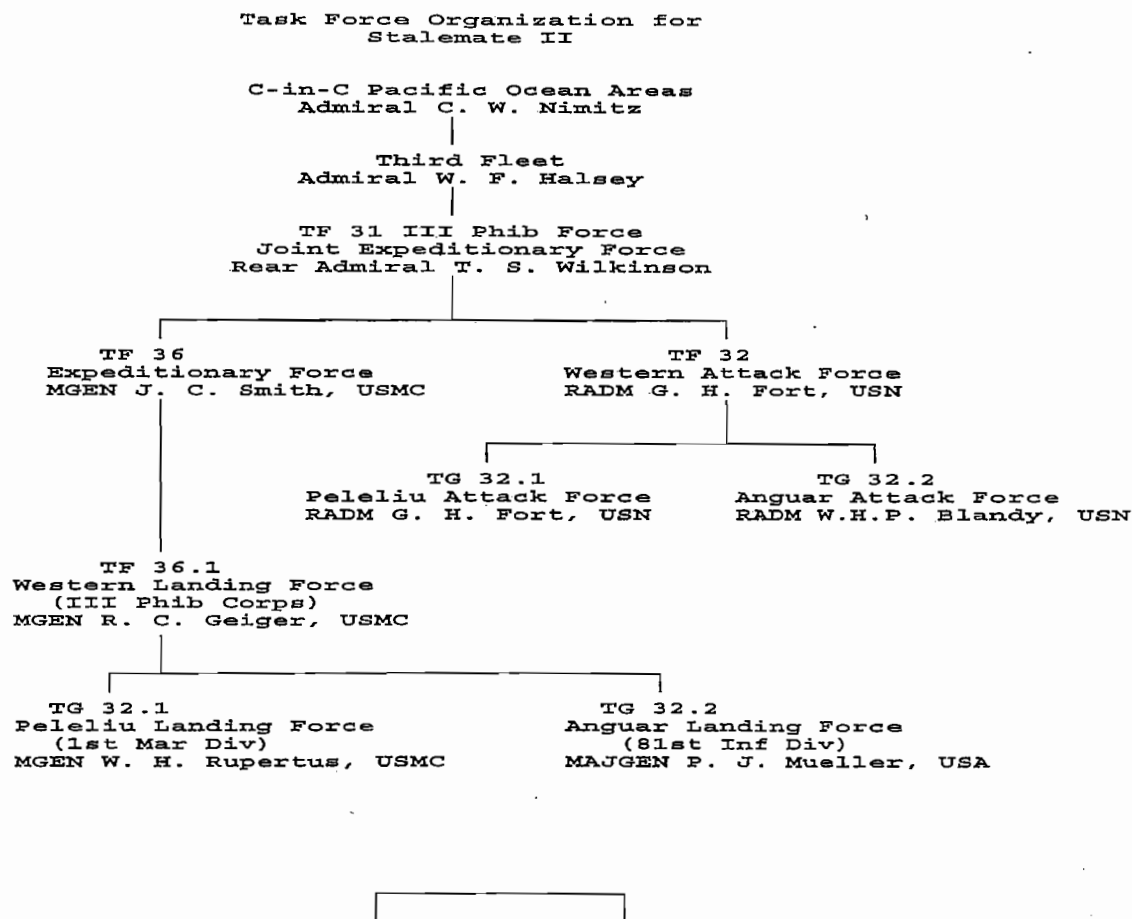


Figure 5. Operation Stalemate Task Organization.³⁷

Significant Operational Factors

There were key significant operational factors that gave US commanders the ability to alter their plans prior to the assault on Peleliu but they did not. The first took place in June of 1944 during the battle of the Marianas several months prior. Admiral Mitscher, who commanded TF 38 Fast Carrier Force, was in the middle of supporting

³⁷ Operation Stalemate Task Organization figure depicting TF organization for Adm. Nimitz from Moran.

amphibious operations in Saipan. During the operations, Japanese air groups from the Japanese Northern Navy force commanded by Admiral Ozawa were detected 125 miles away. This was the main aviation group of the Japanese Navy. Admiral Mitscher immediately launched his fighters and put more US fighters in the air than the Japanese. By utilizing his air power and launching them in advance he would catch the Japanese fleet by surprise.

The result was what became known as the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot". It would become known as one of the most famous one-sided airpower victories in military history. US Hellcat pilots "shot down over 400 enemy aircraft and eliminated most of the elite cadre of Japanese naval fighter pilots".³⁸ Although this major victory took place during the battle of the Marianas, destroying the Japanese aviation group would directly affect the Japanese ability to conduct an efficient air campaign against the US fleet during the remainder of the Pacific war. The victory essentially rendered the Japanese air arm all but impotent.³⁹

The strategic objective in the Pacific war was to defeat the Japanese. In order to shape the strategic objective, the operational plans called for a strategy of island hopping to close in on the mainland. Once in distance, US forces would utilize deep air bombing attacks to neutralize the Japanese mainland. Although the Philippines were a major operational concern, it was not the US strategic goal. By examining the map and geographic picture, one would be able to easily ascertain that the Marianas were in the ideal location for achieving the strategic bombing of Japan. The decision to put much focus on the Philippines was problematic and exhausting. "The seizure of Saipan, Tinian,

³⁸ Kirk, John and Young, Robert. *Great Weapons of World War II*. New York, NY. Walker Publishing Company. 1990. P. 39.

³⁹ Gailey. (1983). P. 190.

and Guam had made the Palaus relatively unimportant except as a rear echelon base.”⁴⁰

Not only were the Marianas ideally located but they, specifically had supportable airfields in which US forces could utilize.

The final significant factor that should have led Admiral Nimitz and other commanders from pressing on with Operation Stalemate was the island shaping activities. Admiral Halsey, Commander of Third Fleet, had been shaping the area of operations days and weeks prior to the assault on Peleliu with his aviation components. On September 12 and 13, Admiral Halsey’s fleet had conducted 1200 sorties a day over Peleliu and central Philippines shooting down 173 planes, destroying 305 on the ground, and sinking 59 ships.⁴¹ Admiral Halsey was quite taken by the tremendous success and lack of opposing Japanese force both on ground and in the air. “Through carrier raids in the Palaus and the Philippines, he discovered that Japanese air strength in the Philippines was not as great as previously thought and so recommended advancing the Philippines schedule and skipping the Palaus.”⁴²

With the assault on Peleliu days away, Admiral Halsey assembled his planners to come up with a new recommendation to Admiral Nimitz on how to proceed past the Palau and go directly to the Philippines. “Halsey ordered his chief of staff, Rear Admiral R.B. Carney, to send an urgent message to Admiral Nimitz on 13 September, just two days before the planned assault on Morotai and the Palaus, recommending:

1. Plans for the seizure of Morotai and Palaus be abandoned.
2. That the ground forces earmarked for these purposes be diverted to MacArthur for his use in the Philippines.
3. That the invasion of Leyte be undertaken at the earliest possible date.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Gailey. (1983). P. 190.

⁴¹ Halsey, William F. *Admiral Halsey's Story*. New York, NY. Whittlesey House Publishers. 1947. P. 199.

⁴² Moore. (2004). P.155.

⁴³ Moran. (2002). P. 8.

Admiral Halsey truly felt that resources and manning should have been allocated directly to the Philippines and that Peleliu and the Palau Island group should have been bypassed. "The idea of bypassing key Japanese strong points and thereby isolating their garrisons was firmly established by this time. Thus if planners had chosen to ignore Peleliu, they would not have been introducing a new concept."⁴⁴

Outcome

Admiral Nimitz acted quickly on Halsey's message by sending a message to the JCS. The JCS consulted with General MacArthur and a day before D-Day on Peleliu, it was decided to speed up the Leyte operation based off of Halsey's recommendation.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the recommendation to bypass Peleliu was not considered. Admiral Nimitz was never known as a commander to take a risk as he still felt the Japanese air power could upset MacArthur's plan.

"Admiral Nimitz never fully explained his decision to overrule Halsey, saying that the invasion forces were already at sea, that the commitment had already been made and that it was too late to call off the invasion. The Palau Islands (Peleliu) had excellent airfields from which an invasion force against the Philippines could suffer air attacks. Also, there were several thousand first-rate troops who could be sent to reinforce the Philippine garrison. Both factors, Halsey insisted, could be dealt with by the use of air strikes and naval bombardments, without having to commit ground troops, but Nimitz overruled him."⁴⁶

The assault on Peleliu began on 15 September 1944 and the island would not be officially secure until 27 November 1944. US casualties totaled 9,740 including 1790

⁴⁴ Gailey. (1983). P. 189.

⁴⁵ Moran. (2004). P. 9.

⁴⁶ Moran. (2004). P. 9.

killed in action.⁴⁷ The total number of Japanese casualties was 10,695, almost all being killed in action.⁴⁸ Combat operations would last for a full 73 days until the final Japanese forces committed suicide on the northern end of the island. General Rupertus, commander of 1st Marine Division, was sadly mistaken when he told the Marines of 1st Marine Division that he felt the fighting would only last four to five days. Peleliu would end up being one of the most bloodiest victories in all the Pacific war.

“Halsey would always disagree with Nimitz’s decisions regarding Peleliu, claiming that whatever the value of the airfields and anchorages afforded by the Palaus, the cost of taking them would be too high.”⁴⁹ In the end General MacArthur’s right flank was secure and he was able to retake the Philippines. Peleliu airfield received very little attention and contributed extremely limited air support for the remainder of the war. As history shows us, Tinian not Peleliu, would play a crucial role in reaching US strategic goals.

Conclusion

The reason for continuing on with Operation Stalemate II is invalid. Admiral Halsey’s fleet had rendered the Japanese airpower combat ineffective and neutralized any threat that would have come to MacArthur and his forces. Bombing strikes on Japan’s mainland could have been easily accomplished through the islands of the Marianas. Therefore, Japanese forces on Peleliu island could have been left alone.

⁴⁷ Moore. (2004). P. 150.

⁴⁸ Moore. (2004). P. 150.

⁴⁹ Moran. (2004). P. 9.

Operation Stalemate II, the battle of Peleliu will always be known in our Corps history as the forgotten battle. How did this one battle enhance and contribute to the US strategic goal of defeating the Japanese empire and was the tragic loss of life and thousands of casualties worth the cause? Gailey adequately remarks; “the authors of the official Marine Corps history of the operation have dismissed such questions as ‘idle conjecture’ and have stated that the planners of Stalemate ‘on the basis of the information available’ concluded that the seizure of Peleliu was necessary in order for the larger and more important Philippine operation to succeed. Such a conclusion is largely an apology for the upper-echelon Navy and Marine officers who did not use effectively the intelligence reports available to them.”⁵⁰

The battle of Peleliu was a terrible operational decision that could and should have been changed. This paper illustrated and precludes that seizing the island of Peleliu did little to nothing to contribute to US strategic goals at the time. Peleliu received little operational use for future Pacific theater offenses against the Japanese. It was indeed an island that should have been bypassed. US commanders made a dreadful mistake by falling in love with a plan that should have altered and revised. “For the Marines who stormed ashore on Peleliu, however, the strategic value of the island may not have been clear, but duty was.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Gailey. (1983). P. 191.

⁵¹ Garrand. (1971). P. 52.

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